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Notes from Mosier — The Silver Swan

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The English Renaissance composer **Orlando Gibbons** (1583-1625) published perhaps his most famous work, a madrigal, titled *The Silver Swan* in 1612. During that time a popular conceit held that swans, nearing death, were granted the gift of speech. The lyrics to the madrigal have been ascribed to **Gibbons**, to his associate **Sir Christopher Hatton**, and are by some regarded as anonymous. The madrigal, in five voices, is an achingly beautiful choral work, and during my time in Oxford May Day was always a treat, when the choir of **Magdalen** singing madrigals from the college tower at dawn.

The lyrics are as follows:

*The Silver Swan, who living, had no note,
When Death approached, unlocked her silent throat,
Leaning her head upon the reedy shore,
Thus sang her first and last, and sang no more:
"Farewell all joys! O Death come close mine eyes,
More geese than swans now live, more fools than wise."*

This is but one of many examples of an older generation proclaiming their grief and sorrow over the perceived shortcomings of their younger counterparts. Alas it is that I find myself increasingly identifying with the *Old Codgers Club* and viewing the behavior of younger librarians with dismay.

I'll confine this rant to a few topics, in the belief that not many of you will read much further anyway. But here are a few bones I will pick (or dead horses I'll kick, or what you will):

Amazon. I've already spoken out about what I view as the obscene practices of **Amazon**. During my bookselling career, when I was still (at least somewhat) restrained, I bit my tongue when librarians would tell me in one breath that they "wouldn't dream of shopping at Wal-Mart" but would then proclaim they did much of their book acquisitions through **Amazon**, **Wal-Mart's** digital equivalent. The arguments that faculty and students expect delivery in a couple of days doesn't hold water with me. It's time we stop this capitulation to immediate gratification and tell faculty, "Look, if you really needed that for your course reserves you needed to ask for it last month." Ordering from a predatory, abusive organization is not acceptable. Convenience does

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a crisis. Leading academics have taken up arms, so to speak, and have established their own publishing entities, with journals, for example, that publish top-drawer papers that news organizations run to for the latest relevant scientific and medical information. Governments and funding agencies take steps that threaten the health of your lucrative business model.

The STM publishing industry and individual houses have taken steps to deal with these threats — calling for shutting down Internet privacy sites, for example — and to bolster their image as stewards of STM knowledge and information. Readers of this magazine are doubtlessly familiar with most or all of the new journal publishing business models, as well as the industry givebacks and concessions made to the STM academic and professional communities.

Say what you will about whether the industry and its eight-hundred-pound gorillas have been dragged kicking and screaming into this state of affairs. Suffice it to say that shareholders' pockets can no longer be the sole concern of STM publishing executives. Not if they want to survive — and want their companies to prosper. Their primary concern can no longer focus solely on profits that will translate into shareholder value. Publishing executives also have to perform the necessary balancing acts I've been alluding to. So long as revenues and profits don't head south, of course, and desperate measures are required. 🌿

not justify exploitation. You are supporting an organization that does not pay a living wage or benefits, and bullies its suppliers. This does not represent the core values we express as librarians, and to cave to this pressure is inexcusable. I feel that in becoming a librarian I have joined a tribe of hypocrites.

PDA/DDA — I have written already that on one level we have always been patron-driven: if a patron wants something, we do our best to get it. I will grant that adding a PDA/DDA option to your library's suite of services can be beneficial to users. But those who in recent years have advocated abdicating all collection development responsibility to this model do so at the severe detriment of at least a certain percentage of their patron base. I have heard AULs from **ARL** libraries expound such views. What utter gibberish. Those in an academic community who cotton on to what this can deliver will exploit it to their advantage; those who don't will suffer. As a collection development officer your duty is to maintain some form of balance; to relinquish *all* decision-making is to build an unbalanced, out of sync collection and serve your patron base poorly.

Social media / social skills — like PDA/DDA, social media focus has gotten totally out of control. These are tools; like any tools, they can be used wisely or inappropriately. If you spend more than an hour a day on Facebook there's likely something seriously wrong with your values. Yes, we need to engage users and patrons utilizing the media they use and are comfortable with, but not to the point of compromising our core values.

Also, those of you in acquisitions, collection development, and technical services need to take a crash course in etiquette. For example: it is not acceptable or appropriate to ignore telephone calls or emails from vendors seeking to schedule appointments. As a young bookseller (in those pre-email, pre-web days) I scheduled meetings and enjoyed the professional courtesy and easy social grace of a generation of librarians now largely retired. Later, when I was a library director, I faithfully replied to all such calls, often explaining that our budget or collection requirements didn't fit with the vendor's offerings — but I had the decency and fundamental politeness to respond. To disregard such requests is irresponsible, unprofessional, and ultimately expensive to your institutions, because vendors must schedule itineraries and build business models around workable scenarios. If you are charged with spending public money — perhaps in the millions — you need to behave in a way that stands up to public scrutiny.

Conversely, vendors need to understand the world of libraries. I got telephone calls in my library director days from companies who had products and packages whose cost exceeded my total materials budget. I politely explained we couldn't afford their offering, asked to be taken off their call list, and in some cases, e.g., children's materials, pointed out we didn't have very many kids in our district. One of the primary reasons we established the **Feather River Institute**, which has subsequently transitioned into the **Acquisitions Institute at Timberline Lodge**, was to create a forum to enable librarians, publishers, serials agents, booksellers, and library automation vendors better to understand the business realities and challenges each group faces.

So we're back to the Swans. I had younger colleagues at **Blackwell's** who were ambitious, in some cases able, and driven, but had no interest in paying their dues. Some have gone on to library careers with lofty titles but questionable responsibilities that might seem unwarranted given the perilous state of library funding (what, indeed, do some of these positions [I'll refrain from identifying job titles] truly have to do with our mission? Yes, these functions need to be addressed, but it would seem we do so at a disproportionate level.). Once again we confront the beast of instant gratification. To them I would simply say: follow this path at your peril: you too will be at this watershed, not all that far distant, where the high water mark can be seen and you will look back on your successors with a mixture of who knows what?

"An individual is rich in the things he can do without." — **Henry David Thoreau** 🌿